

Then and Now

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There are significant differences between Germany of the 1930's and the United States of the early 21st Century:

- 1) The extreme evil of the Third Reich and Hitler made clear the need for resistance to Hitler's leadership. The climate in the United States today is more ambiguous and therefore more difficult to discern with clarity.
- 2) Germany of the 1930's was fairly homogeneous. One language; defined areas of Protestants and Catholics. The Jewish population was limited to urban centers. In the United States today we have many languages represented in our public schools. We have a great diversity of world religions and those who profess no religion at all.

Five comparisons that merit consideration.

- 1) Use of a national trauma to justify repression and aggression.
 - ∞ Germany Then: The burning of the Reichstag Building in Berlin in February 1933 a month after Hitler came to power was used to justify retaliation against the communist accused of setting the fire. The next day an emergency executive order was issued which laid the foundation for the dictatorship that followed.
 - ∞ United States Now: The 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington D.C. was used as a cover for the invasion of Iraq even though a connection between 9/11 and Iraq has never been substantiated.
- 2) Erosion of civil liberties, especially among the targeted group.
 - ∞ Germany Then: An emergency decree lifted the civil liberty protection; restricted personal freedoms; and introduced censorship.
 - ∞ United States Now: The War on Terrorism has brought about the USA Patriot Act-- rushed through Congress—Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism. It includes provisions that deny those labeled as “enemies” basic civil rights.
- 3) Torture and Prisoner Abuse.
 - ∞ Germany Then: Bonhoeffer was never notified of the reason for his imprisonment. A letter was later found in Nazi archives in Prague in the 1990's. The camps were full of incidents of arbitrary and intentional abuse and torture.

- ∞ United States Now: Documented incidents of abuse of Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. Also use of psychological forms of torture.

4) Isolationism.

- ∞ Germany Then: Germans needed government permission to travel outside Germany. Currency could not be converted. It was a crime to listen to the BBC.
- ∞ United States Now: Rejection or refusal to comply with some international treaties.

5) Lust for War.

- ∞ Germany Then: The Nazi regime planned and prepared for war, then provoked it to implement industrial expansion, conscription of troops, repression of Civil rights; and inflicting suffering and torture on select groups deemed to be the enemy.
- ∞ United States Now: Evidence supports the theory President Bush's administration planned to go to war in Iraq within days after the 9/11 attack. In spite of massive global protests to the contrary, the administration was utterly determined to launch this war. No war that is lusted for can be a war of last resort, and therefore a just war.

Questions for Discussion

- 1) What changes in civil liberties have you observed in the United States over the past decade? Do you think are improving or degenerating in terms of personal freedom? How about national security?
- 2) Do you think our current system of checks and balances is serving us adequately when it comes to decisions of military action? If not, what changes would you advocate?
- 3) What do you think should be a national policy for handling prisoners of war, declared enemies, and people thought to be terrorists?
- 4) What is an appropriate role for the church in public affairs?
- 5) What is the most effective method for individuals or groups to communicate their concerns about public policies?

- 6) What advice would you give a new pastor about the concept of separation of church and state?